



ACT AT SIXTY

From Data Provider
to Change Agent

LEARNING | MEASUREMENT | NAVIGATION



ACT[®]

60
years



INTRODUCTION

You may know ACT as the college admissions test that's been in existence for 60 years. And that is still core to what we do. But in 2004, we decided to use the data to develop our first public-facing report about the state of college readiness. Since then, we have continued to evolve, building on our foundation as not only an assessment provider but also a leader in the fields of education and workforce development policy. And now, in 2019, we are taking another evolutionary step: transforming into a learning company.

This paper presents a brief selected narrative of ACT's history: from the predictive value of our testing data for colleges, to sharing what our data tell us about the state of education and workforce development in the United States, to our role in advancing policies and creating tools to enable individual learning and success both now and in the future.



THE PAST

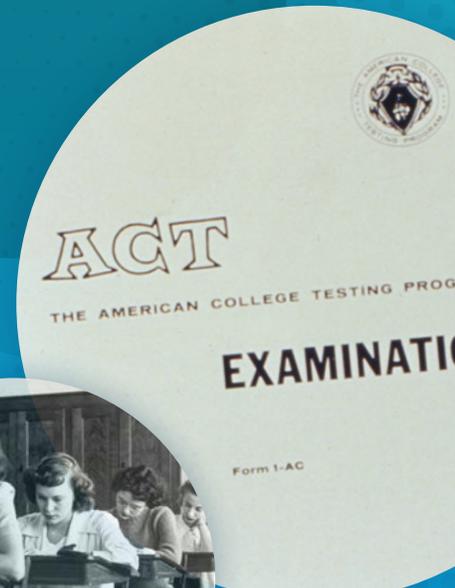
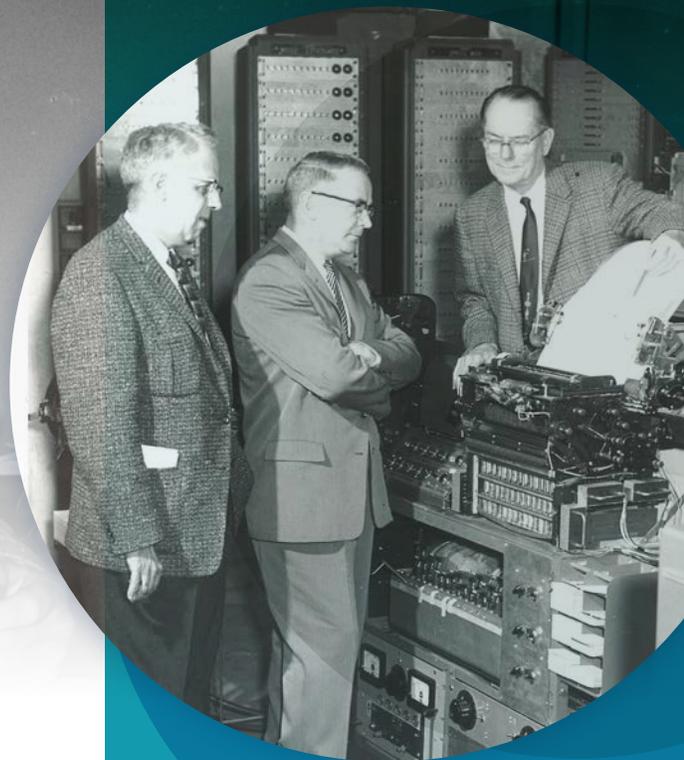
In November 1959, the ACT Assessment was administered for the first time, beginning ACT's longstanding history of measuring how well students near the end of their high school career will perform academically in the first year of college and beyond. Just over two years later, in January 1962, ACT announced the predictive value of the test in an analysis of the original cohort of test takers.¹

Throughout the 1960s, as part of one of their main charges, ACT researchers continued to conduct studies addressing core issues related to the predictive value of admissions testing, helping to establish ACT as a leader in the field of educational measurement research.

During its first four decades, ACT also leveraged its research findings to inform education-related policy discussions. For example, in 1989 ACT was elected to membership in the Washington Higher Education Secretariat, then composed of 35 national higher education organizations, whose leaders met monthly to discuss and develop pressing issues in higher education. (ACT remains a member of the Secretariat; see <http://whes.org/members>.)

Ten years later, in 1999, ACT expanded the scope of its research, which until then had consisted mainly of studies related to college admissions and college course placement.² This expansion meant a focus on two additional areas: equity (i.e., opportunity gaps in K-12 education) and the relationship between high school coursework and performance on the ACT.

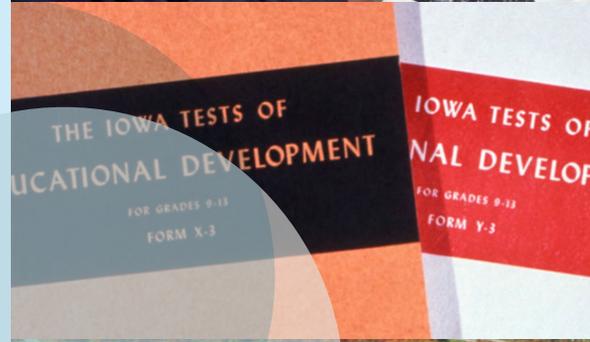
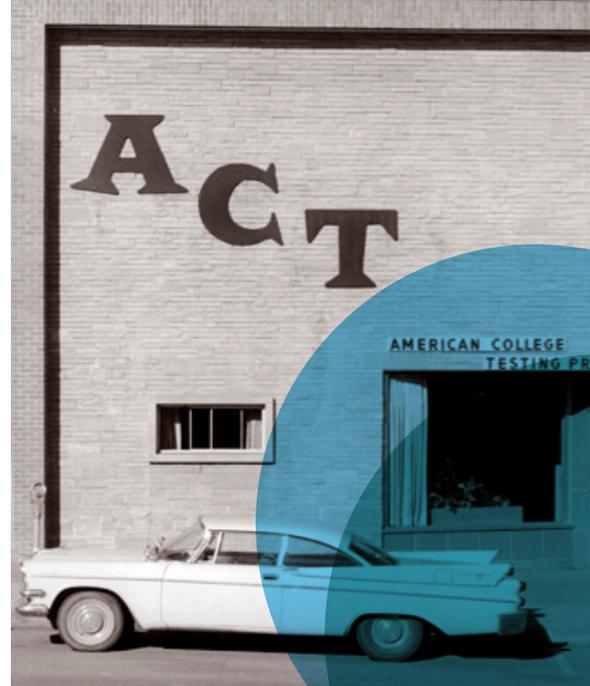
Then, in 2000, ACT developed a set of priorities for the new millennium that included the charge to “[e]xpand ACT’s involvement in research and national dialogues aimed at



informing policy decisions on significant educational and workforce development issues.” The goals of this charge were to make ACT research findings more broadly available and take a stronger role in influencing state and federal education and workforce policy.

The steps taken in 1999 and 2000 led eventually to *Crisis at the Core* (2004),³ the first ACT report to present ACT data in relatively straightforward language designed for accessibility by a general readership. The report’s main findings were that substantial percentages of high school students had not taken a core curriculum and were not academically ready for college-level courses. *Crisis at the Core* was also the first ACT report that deliberately engaged an audience of educators, administrators and legislators by concluding with policy recommendations, as well as the first to earn significant media attention about its findings, including coverage in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and CNN.

After *Crisis at the Core*, ACT continued to publish a number of reports containing recommendations based on ACT data, including (but not limited to) *Reading Between the Lines*,⁴ about how the ability to read complex texts is the strongest indicator of readiness for college-level reading; *Ready for College and Ready for Work: Same or Different?*,⁵ a demonstration that students need to be educated to a comparable level of readiness in reading and mathematics regardless of whether they are headed for college or workforce training after high school; *Rigor at Risk*,⁶ which makes the case that the rigor of high school core courses has more impact on students’ college readiness than simply taking those courses; and *The Forgotten Middle*,⁷ which showed that students’ level of academic achievement by eighth grade has a larger impact on their eventual level of college and career readiness than anything that happens academically in high school.





THE PRESENT

Just as ACT's work has evolved throughout the past 60 years – adding assessment-based policy research to assessment development – today ACT is again pushing into new territory. While ACT research and reports have performed a valuable function by identifying issues and offering recommendations for changes, the next stage of ACT's evolution is as an *implementer* of change.

Indeed, ACT has served a critical role in “sounding the alarm” about a particular set of education- and/or workforce development-related problems (as noted above). And yet we realize now, more than ever, that the solutions needed to solve the problems of today demand moving beyond measuring and highlighting the problem or issue and recommending ways to solve it. As shared by CEO Marten Roorda, ACT's next step involves finding ways to “connect measurement with educational research in ways that help make the best recommendations for teachers and students.”⁸

What does this look like? First, in recent years, ACT has been framing its data and research not solely around what others can do to solve problems, but also around how ACT itself can contribute – and is contributing – to doing so. Two steps in this direction have been the white papers that helped explain the research behind and rationale for the ACT Holistic Framework of Education and Work Readiness⁹ and the ACT Hierarchical Education and Workplace Readiness Framework.¹⁰

In addition, ACT has begun broadening its policy offerings to include practice. In 2015, ACT launched an initiative to increase the number of eligible high school students in dual enrollment programs across the nation.¹¹ Last year, ACT released the



Helping people achieve education and workplace success.



second edition of its policy platforms for K-12 education, higher education and workforce development (all first published in 2014) and a new platform devoted to career and technical education;¹² all four platforms display a thorough engagement with the education and workforce policy landscapes on the federal and state levels, and contain numerous references to and ideas for practical solutions to education and workforce challenges.

As an example of one policy platform recommendation — addressing the needs of the whole learner — moving into practice, ACT recently began its “breakfast before testing” initiative, in which students at selected ACT test centers were offered the opportunity to eat breakfast before taking the ACT test, both to potentially offset hunger during the administration that could detract from students’ ability to perform, and simply to help ensure that students can begin the test day with something in their stomachs.

There are many other ways that ACT is putting a spotlight on challenges and opportunities for improvement in the education and workforce development spaces while also offering solutions and interventions and explaining how these can accelerate both institutional success and individuals’ learning and progress along their chosen educational and career paths.

For example, we anticipate that the formative assessments and other innovative methods of measuring individualized student learning that ACT is working on will continue to be in demand in the classroom and that this demand may broaden in coming years. Similarly, the growing prevalence of efforts to incorporate social-emotional learning into the school curriculum is another area where ACT can expand its reach to focus on cutting-edge, equity-based interventions outside the context of assessment.

Or, to take an even simpler example, ACT can leverage its experience working on data privacy legislation to focus attention on what ACT is doing to ensure responsible research use, and the continued security, of the student data it collects.

Another avenue by which ACT turns research into practice is its Center for Equity in Learning, which focuses on closing gaps in equity, opportunity and achievement for underserved populations and working learners. Launched in 2016 as a means of doubling down on ACT’s mission of education and workplace success for all, the Center works both within ACT¹³ and with external partners to affect change through research, partnerships and strategic engagement. In September 2017, alongside partners from the National College Access Network, Better Make Room, American University’s Center for Postsecondary Readiness and Success, and the American College Access Campaign (ACAC), ACT’s Center for Equity in Learning launched Steps2College.org, which created a one-stop resource for all the steps in the college-going process. This effort unified resources from all the partners in a single, easy-to-use site for counselors, advising professionals, students and their families.

In January 2019, ACAC joined the Center, further enabling ACT to reach, empower and advance the education goals of first-generation and underserved students. ACAC, previously housed at the American Council for Education and supported by ACT, reaches students in all 50 states and the District of Columbia with tools and resources to empower their college application journey.

By means of these kinds of changes, ACT is 1) translating its data into research-based tools to help solve nationwide education and workforce problems; 2) helping to implement the recommendations made in its reports; and 3) moving beyond policy into policy-driven, policy-informed actions.



THE FUTURE

ACT's evolution is also reflected in its current transformation into a learning company, devoted as much to intervention as to diagnosis – a company that does not just assess learning but also helps make learning happen. To this end, ACT has recently taken steps to create a new internal “ecosystem” that integrates new initiatives and foci into ACT's traditional work, through both self-driven innovations and those made possible via investing in or acquiring like-minded companies or technologies.¹⁴

A big part of the new ecosystem is the creation of ACTNext. Driven by an awareness that most of the learning a person does over a lifetime does not take place in a classroom and that recent breakthrough technologies have improved the understanding of what people learn, how they learn it and how their learning and needs develop over time, ACTNext integrates psychometric research with artificial intelligence algorithms and emerging technologies to support development of the next generation of instruments for adaptive and personalized learning. These instruments will be designed to provide learners with actionable feedback on, and meaningful interventions related to, hard-to-measure constructs such as teamwork, collaborative problem solving, engagement, creative thinking and social-emotional skills.

In this way, ACTNext is helping transform ACT into a company that both monitors student progress toward readiness and helps accelerate that progress with data-driven innovative solutions.





CONCLUSION

Just as ACT's onetime motto, "Information for life's transitions," evolved into the mission statement "Helping people achieve education and workplace success," ACT has evolved from providing data to also providing data-driven, people-oriented services and policy solutions. As ACT enters its next 60 years, its past and current expansions into new territory position it for even greater successes in the future.



NOTES

¹Information about ACT's history in this and the following section is taken from *ACT: The First Fifty Years, 1959–2009* (Iowa City: ACT, 2009).

²Planning and Development Committee Report, Board of Trustees Minutes, January 23–24, 1999, ACT Archive. (Citation from *ACT: The First Fifty Years*.)

³*Crisis at the Core: Preparing All Students for College and Work* (Iowa City: ACT, 2004), http://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/crisis_report.pdf (2005 reprint).

⁴*Reading Between the Lines: What the ACT Reveals About College Readiness in Reading* (Iowa City: ACT, 2006), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED490828.pdf>.

⁵*Ready for College and Ready for Work: Same or Different?* (Iowa City: ACT, 2006), <http://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/ReadinessBrief.pdf>.

⁶*Rigor at Risk: Reaffirming Quality in the High School Core Curriculum* (Iowa City: ACT, 2007), https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/rigor_report.pdf.

⁷*The Forgotten Middle: Ensuring that All Students Are on Target for College and Career Readiness before High School* (Iowa City: ACT, 2008), <https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/ForgottenMiddle.pdf>.

⁸Tony Wan, "ACT's Latest Act: Investing in an Open-Source Assessment Startup," *EdSurge*, September 5, 2018, <https://www.edsurge.com/news/2018-09-05-act-s-latest-act-investing-in-an-open-source-assessment-startup>.

⁹Wayne Camara, Ryan O'Connor, Krista Mattern, and Mary Ann Hanson, eds., *Beyond Academics: A Holistic Framework for Enhancing Education and Workplace Success* (Iowa City: ACT, 2015).

¹⁰*Ready for What? Development of a Hierarchical Framework Linking College Readiness and Career Readiness* (Iowa City: ACT, 2018), <https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/Ready-for-What-May-2018.pdf>.

¹¹See *Using Dual Enrollment to Improve the Educational Outcomes of High School Students* (Iowa City: ACT, 2015).

¹²See "ACT 2018 Policy Platforms," <http://www.act.org/content/act/en/state-and-federal-programs.html>.

¹³For example, the Center works with ACT Research and Policy & Planning on collaborative studies such as *The Digital Divide and Educational Equity: A Look at Students with Very Limited Access to Electronic Devices at Home* (Iowa City: ACT, 2018, <https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/R1698-digital-divide-2018-08.pdf>) and *Rural Students: Technology, Coursework, and Extracurricular Activities* (Iowa City: ACT, 2019, <https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/R1734-rural-equity-2019-02.pdf>).

¹⁴Examples of acquisitions include the National Research Center for College and University Admissions (which links colleges and universities to the nation's largest college and career planning program for students seeking postsecondary guidance), the American College Application Campaign (discussed in the previous section), Knovation (a leading curator of open educational resources for K-12), and automated item generation technology from MGHL Consulting.